EVALUATION OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE'S SUPPORT TO MEMBER STATES IN ADDRESSING CHALLENGES RELATED TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Evaluation Report – Key Takeaways

September 2022

COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

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Disclaimer

The analysis and recommendations in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Council of Europe or its member states. This is an independent publication by the Directorate of Internal Oversight – Evaluation Division.

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List of acronyms

Congress	Congress of Local and Regional Authorities
DGA	Directorate General of Administration
DPB	Directorate of Programme and Budget
EC	European Commission
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PACE	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
PO	Private Office of the Secretary General and the Deputy Secretary General
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
WfD	World Forum for Democracy
WFP	World Food Programme

Concise report

This document is a key takeaways version of the "Evaluation of the Council of Europe's support to member states in addressing challenges related to the Covid-19 pandemic".

Object of the report

This report presents the results of the evaluation of the Council of Europe's support to member states in addressing challenges related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The evaluation examined the programmatic response of the Organisation to Covid-19 in assisting member states to fulfil their commitments to maintaining human rights, rule of law and democracy. The evaluation analysed the criteria of relevance, effectiveness and efficiency with a series of evaluation questions in order to improve future crises responses and modernise working methods and technology. The main users of the evaluation are Council of Europe stakeholders and decision-makers.

Methodology

The evaluation was conducted internally by the Evaluation Division of the Directorate of Internal Oversight (DIO). It involved a mapping exercise of outputs, a benchmarking exercise to identify good practice in crisis management in response to Covid-19 and was informed by a qualitative data collection methodology drawing on general data confronted with specific case study data. It took place over one year, from April 2021 to March 2022, including inception, desk/field and reporting phases.

Multiple data sources

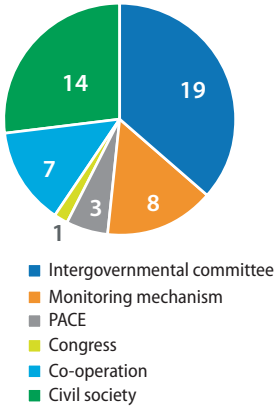
Surveys
- Staff: 573 respondents (out of 1636)
- External (PACE, Congress, WfD): 43 respondents (out of 1404)

Interviews
- 59 managers interviewed
- 10 permanent representations

Benchmarking exercise
- 7 international organisations (EC, OSCE, UNESCO, UNODC, OHCHR,

Mapping exercise

Case study
- Georgia, Greece, Germany
- 52 interviewed, 21 women 31 men



Key findings and conclusions

Benchmarking

Given the scale and unprecedented nature of the Covid-19 pandemic no international organisations were prepared or fully equipped to deal with it, including those organisations which might be more experienced in managing and adapting to major crises. The report and findings should be read with this in mind as the crisis provided important lessons ranging from unparalleled testing of risk and crisis management systems to organisational resilience in the form of flexibility, adaptability and creativity.

Relevance

The Council of Europe's relevance was emphasised by the Covid-19 pandemic. Council of Europe standards were universally recognised as vitally important to tackle the challenges of the Covid-19 crisis. The Secretary General's toolkit for member states published on 7th April 2020 "Respecting democracy, rule of law and human rights in the framework of the Covid-19 sanitary crisis", the Venice Commission's reports on derogation from the Convention and European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment's guidelines were particularly praised for the real added value they brought to member states' responses to Covid-19.

The Council of Europe's response to Covid-19 focused on the Organisation's existing areas of expertise. Consequently, the response benefited from the thorough quality control built into established Council of Europe mechanisms and processes. On the other hand, the response was limited to the existing operating areas of the Council of Europe within the wider, overall scope of human rights, rule of law and democracy and was not based on a needs assessment through a thorough consultation of member states.

Many changes were adopted throughout the Organisation, leading to services that were active and responsive almost immediately from the beginning of the crisis. Covid-19 was integrated into the thematic work of all entities. The Secretary General's toolkit represented an emergency strategic framework established early on, but it was used more as guidance rather than an operational framework and it was not used to reshape the overall Programme and Budget response. The adjustments made during the Covid-19 pandemic were predominantly changes in details within existing programmes rather than any major strategic adjustments. The Council of Europe's overall focus of work in relation to Covid-19 was on observing the situation and analysing the effects of the pandemic on human rights, rule of law and democracy. Good initiatives were delivered but not always pursued actively nor at country level. The Organisation did not have the capacity to provide a multi-dimensional, needs-focused, national-level operational response.

Effectiveness

The Council of Europe's response to Covid-19 was perceived as useful, concrete and practical, including providing material support to member states to protect human rights, rule of law and democracy faced with the pandemic. There was, however, only a small number of outcomes from the Council of Europe's response to Covid-19. The concrete tangible support given only reached small numbers, or the messages and guidance only reached small and specific audiences that did not have the capacity to use them given other priorities related to the pandemic.

There was co-operation and partnership both between the Council of Europe and governments and with other international organisations. At the same time existing relationships built into the Organisation's working methods were relied upon more for business continuity than a specific crisis response. International organisations' co-operation and partnership efforts contributed to the effectiveness of all of their responses.

The Council of Europe's response was considered to have had both a direct and indirect influence on some of the member states' measures to tackle Covid-19, in the sense of strengthening the human rights, rule of law and democracy standards of these responses. Stakeholders reported some institutions and policies basing parts of their Covid-19 responses on thematic areas and work of the Council of Europe during the pandemic. Stakeholders in member states occasionally stated that there was not enough scrutiny of the human rights, rule of law and democracy situation during the pandemic. This was mostly linked to not covering all the aspects of human rights, rule of law and democracy and not having enough authority to properly scrutinise human rights.

Efficiency

The Council of Europe was productive during the pandemic period, proving its capacity to continue to operate through teleworking and being limited by restrictive travel regimes. The Council of Europe worked entirely within its existing budget, both from the Organisation's regular resource (Ordinary Budget) and donor funding (Extra-budgetary resources). In the current set up and with the constraints of the pandemic situation, the Organisation would not have had sufficient capacity to absorb additional resources. The pandemic demonstrated that there is a possibility to mobilise significantly increased resources to respond to crisis, in turn strengthening and expanding the donor base, should that be called for in a more strategic response. Doing so would be reliant on the implementation of recommendations made in this report.

There was good communication and internal co-ordination in terms of health considerations and working arrangements, but this was somewhat limited in relation to the programmatic response to Covid-19. Good practice in other organisations highlighted the importance of strengthened internal co-ordination that enabled multi-sectorial approaches and contributed to the effectiveness of responses. In the case of the Council of Europe crucial links and connections between different stakeholders were missing in terms of a programmatic response. A programme crisis response team would be able to make these links and connections.

The external communication flow and feedback was not always adequate in terms of the programmatic response. There were excellent instances of significant amounts of information being collected, in the form of good practices by institutions and authorities provided to intergovernmental and monitoring committees for instance. The Council of Europe did not have the systematic processes of communication and feedback flows that are essential to ensure greater effectiveness. There were examples in the co-operation field of consultants working for the Council of Europe who were able to provide direct support to vulnerable groups in difficult to access areas. These examples demonstrated the potential for networks of experts, consultants and civil society to engage in more country-specific responses.

The Council of Europe demonstrated a natural resilience to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. This was attributed to the commitment and flexibility of staff and the level of autonomy and independence of different services. It would be important to maintain this strength while seeking to improve more systematic resilience. The resilience shown by the Council of Europe to the Covid-19 pandemic appears to be more attributable to the nature of the Organisation and the nature of the crisis than to the design of the response. More overall modernisation is needed with the aim of providing swift, lightweight processes that provide resilience by design. There is demand for deeper reflection beyond tools and working methods.

There were real benefits and real limits to the tools and mechanisms provided to deliver the Council of Europe response to Covid-19 online. The benefits were not always fully exploited due to the lack of adjusted strategy, whilst the limits resulted from poor tailoring to different needs and single options of software.

Recommendations

There were two clusters of recommendations resulting from the evaluation findings and conclusions relating to crisis preparedness and crisis response:

Crisis preparedness and checklist	Institutional capacity to manage crisis
1. Develop a checklist of actions to determine most appropriate programmatic responses to crises. (High priority)	2. Develop and provide advice on fast reaction adjustments to programming in crises. (High priority)
4. Prepare a set of steps to facilitate rapid decision making in a crisis and identify crisis response programmes. (High priority)	3. Reinforce RBM and strategic management guidance to improve focus on results in crises. (Medium priority)
5. Include the possibility to carry out "exceptional monitoring" adapted to crises. (High priority)	7. Draft guidance on fundraising to respond to crisis. (Medium priority)
6. Ensure partnership approaches to amplify messages to fully comply with human rights, rule of law and democracy standards in crises. (Medium priority)	9. Continue to make available multiple solutions for online working. (High priority)
8. Support exchange between headquarters, external offices, expert and Civil Society Organisation networks to respond to crises. (High priority)	

This report presents the results of the evaluation of the Council of Europe's support to member states in addressing challenges related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the extent to which the Council of Europe's programmatic response to the crisis through its support to member states assisted them in fulfilling their commitments to maintaining human rights, rule of law and democracy in the context of threats and challenges posed by the pandemic. Overall, the findings reveal that the Council of Europe was able to respond despite little preparedness for a crisis of such magnitude. The evaluation provides recommendations to further strengthen institutional capacity to manage crisis, to optimise the Organisation's crisis preparedness and to reinforce the strong resilience the Organisation demonstrated during the pandemic.

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